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INFO RUCNRAQ/IRAQ COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L BAGHDAD 002832

SIPDIS

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TAGS: PGOV KDEM KISL IIZ

SUBJECT: SISTANI CALLS ON IRAQIS TO REGISTER TO VOTE

REF: BAGHDAD 2661

Classified By: POLMINCONS ROBERT S. FORD. REASONS 1.4 (B) and (D).

¶1. (U) On August 27, Grand Ayatollah Ali Husayni al-Sistani called on Iraqis to register to vote in the upcoming provincial elections. Through a statement delivered by an official representative of the Najaf-based cleric, Sistani "called on Iraqis to register their names as the (electoral) list is regarded as an important document by the United Nations. With this document, we can comply with international rules." Sistani's statement, delivered on the penultimate day of voter registration, came only 3 days after a meeting he convened on August 24 with a number of journalists to dispel recent rumors concerning his health.

¶2. (C) Comment: Sistani's statement, coming shortly after the August 24 press gathering, reveals that he remains actively engaged in the Iraqi political arena. In 2005 - 2006 the Najaf clerics were anxious that the Iraqi Shia vote and make their numerical superiority felt at the polls. This August 2008 statement comes on the heels of recent statements by Grand Ayatollah Mohammed Ishaq al-Fayyad and Sistani's official representatives, Sheikh Abd al-Mahdi al-Karbala'i and Sayyid Ahmed al-Safi (reftel). The marja'iyyah played an active political role in the 2005 elections. Recent comments suggest that they strongly support the democratic process, but will maintain neutrality toward the respective parties. Furthermore, given Sistani's stature in Iraq, his comments may increase pressure on Baghdad politicians to move forward on a provincial elections law. End Comment.

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